

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 5 *Special American Literature Issue*,
1984-1987

Article 19

1984

Faulkner's Old Man and the American Humor Tradition

W. Craig Turner
Mississippi College

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turner, W. Craig (1984) "Faulkner's Old Man and the American Humor Tradition," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 5 , Article 19.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol5/iss1/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

FAULKNER'S "OLD MAN" AND THE AMERICAN HUMOR TRADITION

W. CRAIG TURNER

MISSISSIPPI COLLEGE

William Faulkner's admiration for and use of the techniques of nineteenth-century humor have long been recognized.¹ Yet with several major exceptions, including those on *The Reivers*, the Snopes trilogy, and the controversial *As I Lay Dying*, close studies of Faulkner's use of traditional humorous techniques within individual works are curiously lacking. The five chapters of his novel *The Wild Palms* that make up "Old Man" include some of Faulkner's most extensive and most obvious use of traditional American humor, and significantly *The Wild Palms* was published in 1939, one year before Faulkner's comic masterpiece *The Hamlet*. In this space I cannot hope to relate humor in "Old Man" carefully to the other five chapters of *The Wild Palms* story—indeed, I cannot hope to exhaust all the humor within "Old Man"—but I shall examine Faulkner's primary uses of humor in the story of the Tall Convict, briefly note its general relationship to the story of Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer, and suggest its significance as a catalyst that enabled Faulkner to complete *The Hamlet*.

Probably the most obvious mode Faulkner has drawn on in "Old Man" is the Tall Tale of the Southwestern humorists.² The whole of the story, of course, is a tall tale: the convict encounters increasingly extreme natural catastrophes as the great Mississippi River flood of 1927 carries him further and further from the security of his prison home and deeper and deeper into a hostile world of flooded farmlands, dead livestock, drowned rabbits, hawks, snakes, alligators, and strangers who are belligerent or who speak another language. The Tall Convict survives near-drowning when his boat overturns—a recurring danger because of the cresting tributaries as the flood moves deeper into the South. He survives the threat of starvation; there are no provisions in the boat which the river carries at its whim. He survives the bullets of those who fear the freedom of a prisoner on the river. He survives the swarming water moccasins; he continually steps on and over them and even sleeps with them after achieving land. He survives the birth of a baby to the pregnant woman he is charged with rescuing, and he survives wrestling alligators with only

a knife as a weapon. In short, throughout much of the story, the significantly unnamed convict is literally up a very big creek without a paddle.

The opening sentence of the narrative helps prepare us for the titanic encounters that follow: "Once (it was in Mississippi, in May, in the flood year 1927) there were two convicts."³ Faulkner quickly associates the Tall Convict's initial crime with heroic achievement when he has his protagonist conceive of the "loot" from the crime as a sort of "Olympic runner's amateur medal—a symbol, a badge to show that he too was the best at his chosen gambit..." (p. 25). Similarly, the man's most trying obstacle, assisting at the birth of the unnamed woman's child, is described as "the crest of his Golgotha" (p. 264).

Such dangers and such heroic associations are worthy of a Paul Bunyan, a Davy Crockett, or a Mike Fink. But the Tall Convict is not a Bunyan, Crockett; Fink, nor any other larger-than-life character from nineteenth-century fiction; indeed, much of the humor of the story derives from the simple-minded convict's inability to recognize the legendary proportions of his adventures. The second Southwest humor tradition Faulkner employs, therefore, is the natural successor to the Tall Tale—the mock heroic or burlesque epic. In the tradition of Johnson J. Hooper's Simon Suggs, Faulkner parodies the romantic concept of the lower class Southern hero; unlike the fast-talking, incorrigible Suggs, however, the Tall Convict derives from the predominantly Down East tradition of the naive, innocent hero.⁴ Even his crime establishes him as a foolish believer in magazine romance fiction:

He had laid his plans in advance, he had followed his printed (and false) authority to the letter; he had saved the paper-backs for two years, reading and re-reading them, memorising them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method, taking the good from each and discarding the dross as his workable plan emerged, keeping his mind open to make the subtle last-minute changes, without haste and without impatience, as the newer pamphlets appeared on their appointed days as a conscientious dressmaker makes the subtle alterations in a court presentation costume as the newer bulletins appear. And then when the day came, he did not even have a chance to go through the coaches and collect the watches and the rings, the brooches and the hidden money-belts, because he had been captured as soon as he entered the express car where the safe and the gold would be. He had shot no one because the pistol which they took away from him was not that kind of a pistol although it was loaded; later he admitted to the District Attorney that he had got it, as well as the dark lantern in which a candle burned and the black handkerchief to wear over the face, by peddling among his pinehill neighbors subscriptions to the *Detectives' Gazette*. (pp. 24-25)

In flashback, Faulkner pictures for us the frightened young would-be thief in all his comic ineptitude frantically trying to convince an equally frightened mail clerk that his mail-order gun is costume—that it cannot respond to the clerk's two wild shots. Years later, he directs his outrage not “at the lawyers and judges who had sent him there, but at the writers, the uncorporeal names attached to the stories, the paper novels—the Diamond Dicks and Jesse Jameses and such—whom he believed had led him into his present predicament through their own ignorance and gullibility” (p. 23).

Just as he embarks on his short-lived career of crime in complete innocence, so does he begin his seven weeks' freedom on the flooded river as an ironic innocent: “For the first time he looked at the River within whose shadow he had spent the last seven years of his life but had never seen before” (p. 73). Thenceforth, the narrative chronicles the superhuman feats he achieves in his innocent, child-like faithfulness to return boat and woman to the authorities, and himself to the security of his prison home. “‘All in the world I want is just to surrender,’” he bemoans again and again (e.g., p. 174). The punch line of the entire anecdote reflects his naive, single-minded view of his fantastic journey when—after seven torturous weeks on the river—he turns himself in with the simple declaration: “All right...Yonder's your boat, and here's the woman. But I never did find that bastard on the cottonhouse’ ” (p. 278). Even after his return, the Tall Convict remains static, an uninitiated fool; obviously, the deputy recognizes this when he advises the warden: “Just call twelve men in here and tell him it's a jury—he never seen but one before and he won't know no better” (p. 328).

Much of his romantic innocence is appropriately devoted to his attitudes toward and his relationship with women. The narrator reflects, “who to say what Helen, what living Garbo, he had not dreamed of rescuing from what craggy pinnacle or dragoned keep when he and his companion embarked in the skiff” (p. 249). Instead, he finds “on the lowest limb of one of the trees...in a calico wrapper and an army private's tunic and a sunbonnet, a woman ...who sat clutching the trunk of the tree, her stockingless feet in a pair of man's unlaced brogans legs less than a yard from the water...” (p. 148). It was for a woman that he attempted his comically inept crime in the first place, and it is over a woman that he gets “in trouble” during his return upriver. “‘You mean you had been toting one piece up and down the country day and night for over a month, and now the first time you have a chance to stop and catch your breath almost you got to get in

trouble over another one?" "one of his fellow convicts incredulously asks (p. 334). Though the temptation does occur to him, he flees it with a "savage and horrified revulsion" when he thinks of the baby (p. 335).

Such a simplistic code, of course, leads him to return to prison with the boat and the woman in tow and then to accept the outrageous addition of a ten-year sentence for attempted escape with the acquiescent reply of a childlike game player: " 'All right...If that's the rule' " (p. 331). He adheres to acceptable rules of law or chivalry as simply-mindedly and as unquestioningly as he had adhered to the rules for robbery laid down in the *Detectives' Gazette*.

In addition to his borrowings from the traditional techniques of Southwestern and Down East humor, Faulkner is not above resorting to the language misuses of the Literary Comedians. He will, for example, throw in a pun from time to time—as when the Tall Convict is described paddling his pregnant charge down the river "with a calculated husbandry of effort" (p. 154). Or he will reach back for a malapropism as when the doctor asks the Convict—in reference to his profusely bleeding broken nose—if he is "hemophilic;" the plump convict here interrupts the Tall Convict's narrative: " 'Hemophilic? You know what that means?' ... 'That's a calf that's a bull and a cow at the same time.' 'No it aint,' a third convict said. 'It's a calf or a colt that aint neither one' " (p. 242). Also in the tradition of the Literary Comedians, Faulkner goes on to strain for one more laugh: " 'Hell fire,' the plump one said. 'He's got to be one or the other to keep from drowning [sic]' " (p. 242).

In keeping with his naive, simple code, the Tall Convict avoids unseemly words like pregnant and substitutes comic euphemisms such as "that thing in your lap" (p. 152). He even comes to think of her as "the belly" (p. 161). Upon his return, he describes to his fellow prisoners the inhabitants of the Atchafalaya region of the Louisiana delta as "not white people... 'Not Americans. [People who talked with a] Gobble-gobble, whang, caw-caw-to-to' " (pp. 239-240).

Occasionally Faulkner employs satirical gibes of the sort favored by the comic lecturers of the last century. For example, the doctor explains to the Tall Convict why he does not turn him in: " 'There has been conferred upon my race (the Medical race) also the power to bind and to loose, if not by Jehovah perhaps, certainly by the American Medical Association—on which incidentally, in this day of our Lord, I would put my money, at any odds, at any amount, at any time' " (p. 249). Likewise the warden, thinking that the convict has drowned;

reasons that "The main thing is to get his name off the books as dead before some politician tries to collect his food allowance" (p. 80). Also from the tradition of the Literary Comedians, Faulkner borrows the anticlimax so valued by Artemus Ward. In fact, the final chapter of "Old Man" is, strictly speaking, an anticlimatic unwinding of the Tall Tale which peaks when the unnamed Convict surrenders.

Faulkner uses other traditional humorous devices in varying degrees. His use of dialect, for instance, entails regional vocabulary—"pirogue" (p. 252), "Cajan" (p. 253), and "levee" (p. 252)—and regional grammar—" 'Hell fire, he aint dead,' the deputy said. 'He's up yonder in that bunk house right now lying his head off probly' " (p. 326). But Faulkner seldom makes use of decidedly regional pronunciation. Similarly, he utilizes third person narration for most of the story, but he also relies on a frame in which the Tall Convict can tell at least a part of his own story: "This is how he told it seven weeks later, sitting in new bed-ticking garments, shaved and with his hair cut again, on his bunk in the barracks..." (pp. 158-159). In addition to the frame narrative technique, Faulkner includes in "Old Man" Southwestern devices such as a humor of physical discomfort; an exclusively masculine, somewhat racy point of view; and the picaresque tradition inherited by the Southwesterners from European fiction: a rascal of low degree living by his wits as he encounters the adventures of the road. Also, Faulkner's comic imagery in "Old Man" is Southern, masculine, predominantly lower class, and heavily animal: " 'You're bloody as a hog!' " (p. 150); "...the convicts sat in a line along the edge of the platform like buzzards on a fence...like dogs at a field trial they stood, immobile, patient almost ruminant" (pp. 66-67). His imagery tends to be very physical, almost slapstick at times: "The shrill voice of the Cajan seemed to buzz at him from an enormous distance...the antic wiry figure bouncing hysterically about him, the face wild and grinning, the voice gobbling and high...the Cajan threw up the rifle, cried 'Boom-boom-boom!' flung it down and in pantomime re-enacted the recent scene then whirled his hands again, crying 'Magnifique! Magnifique!' " (p. 259).

Before the Tall Convict has picked up the pregnant woman, his boat is swept out of control and he is thrown to its bottom:

"He lay flat on his face, slightly spread-eagled and in an attitude of abject meditation. He would have to get up sometime, he knew that just as all life consists of having to get up sooner or later and then having to lie down again sooner or later after a while. And he

FAULKNER'S "OLD MAN"

was not exactly exhausted and he was not particularly without hope and he did not especially dread getting up. It merely seemed to him that he had accidentally been caught in a situation in which time and environment, not himself, was mesmerised; was being toyed with by a current of water going nowhere, beneath a day which would wane toward no evening" (p. 147).

This attitude—this lying face down in the skiff and blaming his broken nose on a fate outside himself—is much more characteristic of the Tall Convict than any heroic achievements he accomplishes during his seven weeks of freedom. At another point Faulkner compares words which the Convict addresses to no one with the scream of a dying rabbit; both he describes as "an indictment of all breath and its folly and suffering, its infinite capacity of folly and pain, which seems to be its only immortality: 'All in the world I want is just to surrender'" (p. 174). Ultimately, of course, both the Tall Convict and his "Wild Palms" counterpart, Harry Wilbourne, surrender: the Tall Convict's is the foolish surrender of his freedom for the sterile security of imprisonment in the State Penitentiary; Harry's is the painful, suffering surrender of a sensitive man to his romantic passion embodied in Charlotte Rittenmeyer. Both men are incurable romantics⁵ who resign themselves to separation from life when their romantic visions are swept away by the realities of living. But Harry Wilbourne's story is one of the "civilized" romanticism of human passion—and is thus tragic—while the Convict's is one of the "primitive" romanticism of the naïf—and is therefore comic.

When on the final page of *The Wild Palms* Faulkner reflects on the sweetheart of the Tall Convict's adolescence — "who to know what Capone's uncandled bridehood she might not have dreamed to be her destiny and fate, what fast car filled with authentic colored glass and machine guns, running traffic lights" (p. 338)—by this time it is obvious that the author has relied heavily on traditional American humor techniques in creating "Old Man." To appreciate fully this use of humor, one must read together the alternating chapters of the stories of Harry Wilbourne and the Tall Convict. Then one can experience the comic mode of the "Old Man" reducing the tragic intensity of "Wild Palms" and providing contrapuntal relief. The relative success of the one story and the relative failure of the other will also, I think, become more obvious.

Since publication of *The Wild Palms* in 1939, most critics (and most readers) have preferred "Old Man" over "Wild Palms." One of the reasons is that the humorous mode is more suited than the tragic to

the likes of our Convict and of Harry—men who so early give up on reality and retire from life, men who do nothing to help mankind endure and prevail. Thus, though we laugh frequently at the Convict's contrapuntal humorous portion of *The Wild Palms*, in the end we find his story not only more entertaining, but also more effective than the unhumorous narrative of Charlotte and Harry in communicating the writer's serious theme of failure. Incorporating "Old Man" into *The Wild Palms* was Faulkner's first successful mature experience with extended humorous writing.⁶ Its writing prompted him, I think, to resume work on a project that he had conceived and initiated in late 1926, but that had flagged soon after.⁷ Several years later he began reworking some of that material for short story publication, but it was not until completion of *The Wild Palms* that Faulkner came back to this material with a novel in mind: in late 1938 he resumed work on "The Snopes book."⁸

A partial catalogue of traditional Old Southwestern humorous devices Faulkner employs in *The Hamlet* would include the Tall Tale—for example, Ratliff's story of Flem outwitting the Devil; mythical, larger-than-life characters—Flem, Eula, and Ike; the mock heroic—Ike's chivalric love affair with the cow; and a lower-class, masculine viewpoint that at times is both cruel and bawdy—Lump's selling tickets to those who wish to see Ike with the cow. *The Hamlet* also makes use of Down East traditions such as the naive innocent—the romantic idiot Ike; the slick trader—Flem Snopes; and the horse-sense philosopher—V. K. Ratliff—as well as a great deal of verbal humor in the vein of the Literary Comedians. Further, there are some suggestive parallels between the Convict's story and the Snopes's story; in keeping with the sterile relationship between the convict and his pregnant charge, for instance, Faulkner creates an unconsummated marriage for Flem and his pregnant wife. Similarly, the overall emphasis on honor in the later novel, as well as Flem's and Ike's obsessive pursuits of their goals, reminds us of the Convict's single-mindedness in "Old Man." Also, much as the "Old Man" story develops contrapuntally with the "Wild Palms" story, so *The Hamlet* develops contrapuntally through its stories of love and stories of trade. The full extent of specific influence that "Old Man" exerted on *The Hamlet* remains for other studies, but we can at least be confident here that Faulkner drew on his recently successful experience of presenting serious themes in the comic mode and of using the techniques of traditional American humor as he moved from one to the other. Much

as *Life on the Mississippi* inspired Mark Twain to return to his work on the Huck Finn story, so "Old Man" must have led Faulkner back to the material that would comprise his comic masterpiece—the *Snopes* book.

NOTES

¹ Representative pieces include Carvel Collins, "Faulkner and Certain Earlier Southern Fiction," in *The Frontier Humorists*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden, 1975), pp. 259-265; Cecil D. Eby, "Faulkner and the Southwestern Humorists," *Shenandoah*, 11 (1959), 13-21; M. Thomas Inge, "William Faulkner and George Washington Harris: In the Tradition of Southwestern Humor," in *The Frontier Humorists*, pp. 266-280; Robert D. Jacobs, "Faulkner's Humor," *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick, N. J., 1973), pp. 305-318; and Otis B. Wheeler, "Some Uses of Folk Humor by Faulkner," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 17 (1964), 107-122.

² Acknowledging an indebtedness to Walter Blair's *Native American Humor* (1937), I would broadly define the Old Southwestern humor as marked by its framework narratives; its oral tale tradition (especially the exaggerated); its use of folklore and local color; its masculine viewpoint that stresses violence, physical discomfort, the bawdy, a general irreverence and the picaresque; and its fascination with the character of the frontiersman. The Tall Tale has been defined most concisely as "a kind of humorous tale common on the American frontier, which uses realistic detail, a literal manner, and common speech to recount extravagantly impossible happenings, usually resulting from the superhuman abilities of a character" (C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th ed. [Indianapolis 1980], p. 440).

³ All parenthetical page references are to *The Wild Palms* (New York, 1939).

⁴ I would broadly characterize the Down East tradition by its authentic depiction of localized background and dialect, its variety of literary modes (letters, poetry, monologues, dialogues, etc.), its humorous interest in social and political issues, and its fascination with three character types (sometimes blended): the shrewd Yankee trader, the crackerbox philosopher, and the gullible innocent.

⁵ By "romantic" I mean, of course, the popular concept marked by an emotional attraction to an heroic, adventurous, mysterious, legendary, chivalric ideal.

⁶ Faulkner had obviously used comic and traditional humorous techniques in his writing from the beginning (see, for example, James M. Mellard, "Soldiers' Pay and the Growth of Faulkner's Comedy," *American Humor: Essays Presented to John C. Gerber*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr. [Scottsdale, 1977], pp. 99-118), but two early pieces deserve special mention: *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is a problematical novel variously discussed for its humor, its comedy, its pathos, and its metaphysics, while "Spotted Horses" was published successfully as a short story in 1931 before its incorporation into

W. Craig Turner

157

The Hamlet (1940).

⁷ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York, 1974), 1:526-529.

⁸ Blotner, 2:1006-1008.